DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 035 CS 214 886

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TITLE First Year Writing Courses: What's the Purpose?
PUB DATE 23 Mar 95
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; Cooperation; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Literature; Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; *Student Needs; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Purpose (Composition); Voice (Rhetoric); *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Erika Lindemann asserts that the purpose of freshman composition courses is primary and must precede any debate on whether or not literature may be taught in composition classrooms. A series of "I believe" statements about what a freshman composition course ought to do was developed. The primary purpose of a first-year writing course is to make students aware of their own development as writers, so they can continue developing as writers in their academic careers and in their future careers and lives. For students to develop their own writing processes, writing teachers need to encourage uncertainty about students' past writing processes; uncertainty will force students to carefully review different techniques and approaches made available to them. First-year writing courses should also help students to develop voice; student writers should experience writing in a variety of settings, non-academic as well as academic. On the other hand, instructors should prepare students to write for other academic courses, including those in the English department; in other words, they must help students learn to write arguments--a necessity at most institutions. First-year writing courses should also be organized around a general theme--"general" because it should allow students the latitude to find topics of interest to them. The agenda of freshman composition must be evaluated in the specific context of the institution where it is taught; the needs of each institution are different. (TB)

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FIRST YEAR WRITING COURSES: WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?

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Like most of our students, writing instructors spend a lot of time asking questions. Asking the purpose of first year writing courses may be one of the most important because it must preface many other discussions, like literature's "place" in the composition course. Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate articulated that important national debate in a 1992 CCCC session and in the March 1993 edition of *College English*. In this month's *CE*, the journal's editors return us to this issue because of the number and intensity of responses they received to the initial session and articles. Lindemann again asserts her belief that the purpose of freshman English courses is primary and must precede any debate on whether or not literature may be taught in composition classrooms. Thankfully, our purpose is not to argue narrowly the pros and cons of literature in freshman English. However, the existence of that question supports the need for more generalized exchanges about why we do what we do in first year writing courses. In both Lindemann's 1993 and 1995 articles, she strongly asserts that "We cannot usefully discuss the role of imaginative literature (however defined) in freshman English without first asking what the purpose of a writing course is" (228). The "to use literature" or "not to use literature" debate also suggests that we need to understand better the purpose of those courses.

To structure my responses, and to avoid the appearance that I have a carefully composed "theory" of first year writing courses, I have developed a few rough "I believe" statements that address the purposes of first year writing courses. After broadly explaining them, I have provided some general and specific pedagogical examples of each, with the specific coming from the

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advanced writing course that I had originally proposed for this session. In writing my proposal for the conference, I had planned to answer another question: what kind of course works for advanced writers? So that the title listed for my talk in the conference bulletin, "Writing the Silence: Listening for the Roar" will not be completely misleading, I will insert some specific examples from that class to support my eclectic beliefs about first year writing courses.

Before explaining my view of a beginning writing course's purpose, I want to offer my assumptions about the nature of writing. Since our assumptions inform our decisions about structuring classes, we should at least recognize their influence. Here are mine: writing is an on-going process; writing develops through a series of meaningful revisions; each individual's writing process is different; writing is usually a shared act between two or more people, and as such it's also a social relationship; people learn to write through writing; writing can help people to understand their world better; in addition, I believe that writing processes can be taught.

These views inform all my assertions about first year writing courses. If my assertions about the purposes of a first year writing course suggest more questions than answers, that's because I have no fixed philosophy and my views are still very much "in process." Perhaps returning to my assumptions about writing will make my current perspective more comprehensible. If not, the closing appendix is an attempt at "clothing" the ideas only suggested in the following belief statements.

Some Beliefs

I believe that the primary purpose of a first year writing course is to make students aware of their own development as writers, so they can continue developing as writers, in their academic careers and in their future

careers and lives. I am not suggesting that writing courses should fulfill any and every purpose, but I am suggesting that we can teach writing in such a way that each student can continue developing his or her process. Whether instructors feel that they teach students to prepare for a future course or a future career, they can foster a student's ability to internalize the process.

In order to help students develop their own writing processes, writing teachers need to encourage *uncertainty* about students' past writing processes. To ask students to develop further their own processes, teachers need to encourage students to examine their own writing. Questioning current assumptions is a traditional principle in teaching: we encourage students to question what they already know, making them less certain and more receptive to new ideas or practices. Introducing students to writing processes from a variety of writers (experienced, non-experienced, published, non-published) communicates many different approaches to writing. The resulting uncertainty allows students to question the "right" way to write while providing students with various approaches to writing. Group work, teacher conferencing, peer work and collaboration provide various examples of different and sometimes conflicting writing processes. Accepting and rejecting certain writing methods helps students work out their own individual writing process.

If we ask students to leave behind preconceived notions about writing, their own and others, we must offer them substantial support. They need to see examples of writing processes and products that work and don't work. The examples will be more meaningful if they come from someone or some topic that they can relate to, a personal association like a peer's, the teacher's, or even the author of some text they're reading on a familiar topic. The process of assuming new ideas and new practices demands support (Nelson 1994). All

writers, especially first year writers, need support from peers--and that's another reason why learning to write is not an individual task. Instructors must also support students in several ways, including individual conferencing and sensitive marginalia. To encourage their individual writing development, students should engage in various writing assignments within the context of the classroom's community. By working with other writers, peers, published writers, and their instructor, students should begin developing a sense of their own processes. Specifically asking students to respond to their own writing processes, to respond within groups, and to respond to instructor comments encourages students to develop a writing process that works for them while also producing writing acceptable to their individual purposes. Responding to various audiences also encourages students to develop voice.

I believe that first year writing courses should help student writers develop voice. By using diverse and plentiful writing exercises and experiences, students will begin developing their own ways of expressing their own ideas. Developing voice is part of the larger process of writing; it requires that students consider their own writing, and their own understanding of their writing that guides their individual purposes and practice. Reflective writing about their writing should make students more conscious of their own purposes and processes. When we give students a way to ask their own questions about writing, we are encouraging them to develop voice. But these questions need to be more "sophisticated" than they would be if they had not reflected on various writing practices from peers, the instructor, and published writers. An instructor's role in helping writers develop voice is a kind of "cognitive structuring" in that the instructor shapes

writing experiences so that students can then see what the "next" questions should be.

I believe that Freshman English instructors need to help student writers in various settings, including non-academic as well as academic, and for various purposes, including personal and analytical. Students should write about something other than written texts. To foster the growth of their writing processes, students should practice writing about their lives and the world around them. Given the world community in which we all live, not to do so would be a genuine disservice to our students, as the 1987 English Coalition Conference indicates. The Coalition's Freshman Reading and Writing Program section established a basis for a national discussion of the purpose of Freshman English courses in its rationale:

> The effective uses of language, which are at the heart of English studies, are of increasing importance to a democratic society. Future citizens will be required to manage enormous amounts of information, in language directed to various audiences and designed to fill particular purposes. In an information age, citizens need to make meaning--rather than merely consume information--in informal, formal, imaginative, and analytic ways and in many settings. (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford 26-27)

As writing instructors, we help students to "make meaning," increase their ability to communicate that meaning, and participate in a lifelong use of language within the context of writing.

Traditionally, and certainly it's still true at my institution, Freshman English instructors are also the faculty members who introduce students to writing in academia. Students should know something about focus, organization and style, while they are learning to create meaning in their

writing. Those areas are often too narrowly translated as word choice, sentence structure, paragraph organization, mechanics, or usage. Of course, we all know that teaching "proficiency" in all those areas in fifteen weeks is impossible. What's not impossible, and what is part of our responsibility, is to introduce students to the conventions of writing and then provide experiences where they can practice them.

In providing experiences for students to "make meaning," writing courses should be as unified as possible. A controlling theme (e. g. education, community, work, language) in a first year writing course provides students with a coherent context for writing, although the purposes and settings may vary. Class themes should relate to writing or language in some largely generalized way (even the themes of silence, work, and community would "generally" relate to writing). I oppose overly specific themes because of the difficulty in choosing a topic that will elicit enough student interest; students need to care enough about the area to read and write about it. Narrowed course themes (native American crafts, Alaskan schooling, Marilyn Monroe's life) may not interest students enough or allow them to form their own opinions. Within the general theme, students would still experiment and practice with various writing purposes, writing personal narratives as well as carefully supported arguments.

By structuring a class with a general theme, instructors may introduce students to polished published writing, as well as polished peer writing. Of course we should continually help students see that other writers do not initially create polished texts, but I think we also need to show students many general models so they can pick and choose for themselves as they develop a voice. Introducing students to "good writing" written by their peers and experienced writers is one way to offer models.

Class themes also provide an organizing principle through which we can show students the big issues that are often found in published "literature" are often the small issues found in their own lives and writing. Traditionally we do begin to teach writing by asking students to write about what they know. That approach reinforces to students that their lives matter, that the small issues (e.g. a friend's death, parent's divorce, a child's first love) are the big issues.

When instructors present students with large, recognizable concepts that are often part of an English teacher's agenda, we are allowing students to see some of the mysterious, often unwritten expectations offered by English teachers. We are showing them some conventions of academic learning that our colleagues and often we expect to see in their writing but never tell them about. In each of these topics, like gender, death and rebirth, war, nature, love and loss, we can reinforce the personal. But in each of these "large" areas, we need to emphasize the personal problems that connects students to the larger community. In so doing, we are also communicating a part of the academic "game" that's necessary for student success. In short, a first year writing course should begin to prepare students for their next academic courses by introducing them to the larger issues implicit in writing and life. It also should prepare them, through their writing, to connect to issues outside of themselves as they continue the developmental process of seeing themselves in a larger world context.

Within the confines of the general class theme, students should be able to choose personal topics that fit the particular assignment's purpose and maintain their interests. For instance, if writing about education, student narratives would focus on the student writer's experiences in education. If writing an analytical paper on education, students would have the right to

choose and define their own narrowed topics within the general theme. All the processes would be strengthened through the use of invention exercises, peer collaboration, group work, models from their own writing, faculty conferences, outside reading and personal reflection. A final note on class themes: they should also relate to students' individual lives as much as possible.

* * *

In a summary response to all of the 1995 College English essays about the place of literature in Freshman English, Jane Peterson asserts that discussing the purpose of Freshman English requires a discussion of "the goal of English studies. . .as well as an acknowledgement [of] institutional and departmental contexts" (313). We need to ground the general debate about purposes and goals in our local contexts; for instance, we need to know who develops writing courses and what level of administrative input is required; we need to now who teaches writing courses and what their personal agendas are; and we need to know who attends those courses and recognize what their purposes are. Again according to Peterson, we need to provide a context for the discussion of Freshman English courses in order to answer questions about their purposes (313).

Although we do still need large, national discussions about writing, we have to reevaluate all of our theoretical beliefs and classroom practices in terms of our specific teaching context. For instance, at my school, I know that not providing students with the ability to write argumentative papers in some part of their first year writing course would be a disservice to them when they reach their next English course, always a literature survey course often taught by professors who teach literature, not writing.

Although considering institutional contexts is a logical and necessary part of determining what we should be doing in first year writing course, it's not a rationale for avoiding the question. I am glad we are asking this question because it must precede many other discussions, like the place of literature in first year writing courses. The interest in that debate suggests that we need more national and local discussions that will move us beyond specific extremes and lead us to a greater understanding of how we may best serve our students' needs as we prepare them for diverse and quickly changing writing contexts that we cannot fully imagine.

Appendix: Classroom Examples for Purposes

1. I believe that the primary purpose of a first year writing course is to make students aware of their own development as writers, so they can continue developing as writers, in their academic careers and in their future careers and lives.

General Example:

Through its several editions, *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* has provided useful and necessarily general prompts that encourage students to think about their own writing process. In a section entitled "Thinking Critically about What You've Learned," the text poses the following questions that encourage students to reflect on their own writing:

> [I]dentify one major problem you needed to solve as you wrote about a remembered event?. . . Determine how you came to recognize the problem. . . . When did you first discover it?. . . Reflect next on how you went about solving the problem. (63)

Other texts and instructors use similar questions to encourage students to develop a process of writing. Some ask students to compose their own philosophies of writing as part of final exams. Such self-conscious attention to the writing process encourages students to see writing as a skill they are developing.

Example from "Silence" course:

In their journals, students responded to everything from peer reviews, group work, my responses (and grades) to the novels and other readings of the courses. In the end, they composed two "working" philosophies, one of their writing process and one of silence's role in literature and their lives.

II. I believe that first year writing courses should help student writers develop voice.

General Example:

Writing personal narratives not only helps students to develop voice, it helps them to practice writing more informally. Responding to student writing, assigned writing "practices" in class, and participating in on-going dialogues on topics (via computer, peer or group work) also provides informal settings for writing.

Students read and responded to texts provided by their peers, themselves, and published writers. They responded to native American myths, novels (*The Bluest Eye; The Town Beyond the Wall; Silence; The Way to Rainy Mountain*), music (John Cage) and movies (*Children of a Lesser God; My Left Foot*) that dealt with silence.

Example from "Silence" course:

Encouraging students to begin writing about what they know helps students become comfortable with articulating their ideas. The first assigned topics dealt with students' lives:

Option 1: *Write about a time when you felt silenced.*

Option 2: *Describe a journey or odyssey that led you to some sort of self-discovery.*

Students also wrote about personal encounters with silence informally. A sample journal question began the course: *Write about a time when another person's body language communicated messages different from that person's words. Describe the situation and how you interpreted the language of the person's eyes or body. Did you talk with that person about the intended*

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communication, and if so, what was the result? If not, why did you ignore it? What made you certain that you had read the non-verbal language correctly. This question also allows students to begin reading their environment and see that analytical skills they may have practiced in reading texts can apply to their daily lives.

III. I believe that Freshman English instructors need to help student writers in various settings, including non-academic as well as academic, and for various purposes, including personal and analytical.

General Example: Engaging students with authentic research problems provides them with a variety of purposes that should also elicit academic and non-academic writing. Ethnography, writing about people and their ways of life, provides a way to introduce students to non-textual research problems. Ethnographic writing assignments allow students to conduct primary research, synthesize and analyze it. Such assignments also require some generalized knowledge about the people studied, so it also requires secondary research.

Teachers may require simple ethnographic papers where students profile a person, place, or event in their community and then make some assertion about it. Requiring some collaboration on the research also provides students with a place to practice negotiating differences, considering various audiences, and participating in problem-solving activities necessary for writing situations outside of academia.

Example from "Silence" course:

One assignment asked students to analyze the structure of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and consider Momaday's purposes in writing that novel. They then practiced with that same form by composing their own narratives about

something from their lives--their response to the seasons. They then chose corresponding symbols of their favorite seasons and wrote about them.

Students also participated in an ethnographic research project that required group work, collaboration, peer review, and a final individual documented essay. The class also required research of primary and secondary research not connected with the text that prompted the assignment: N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain.* Momaday writes from three points of view, the mythological, historical, and personal. Each provides students with a model for family or cultural exploration. The students then searched for silences in their own family traditions.

The project asked students to provide historical sources for their personal family backgrounds that required library and original research. It also asked them to provide the rationale for exploring that particular part of their history. Their curiosity led to the story of their family or generational "silence." Students further prepared for their research by reading mythological and historical accounts of native Americans that I put on reserve in the library. This reading/writing project engendered in the students a more sensitive reading of Momaday and their worlds.

In choosing silence as a course theme, I was choosing a topic that related to language and that provided a creative "space" for students to establish their identities in writing. The writing process often requires that writers think, read, and reflect as part of their writing process. A writer continually breaks and restores the silence as he or she calls language into being. The topic also demonstrated to students a way to read and write more attentively because we read literature that showed characters who chose silence or who were silenced. In these cases, the reader has to explore the language behind the silence.

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Conference on College Composition and Communication

Washington, D.C.

23 March 1995